

# from the HouseTops

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## Saint Benedict Center

*The Slaves of the Immaculate Heart of Mary*

To Our Readers:

We are very happy to be reaching you once more with another issue of FROM THE HOUSETOPS, honoring this time Saint Frances Xavier Cabrini, our first American saint. Mother Cabrini was born in Italy, and she became an American citizen before she died in Chicago, in the very week of Christmas.

The Saint greatly enriched our country. She brought to our land, besides her lovable personality and her great faith and sanctity, a new vision—a vision, indeed, of a Catholic nation in this new world, extending from shore to shore, *a mari usque ad mare*. For this she lived and labored; in this hope she died.

There are men and women alive today who knew her personally; but there are many more living now and to be born in days to come, who fall heirs to what the Saint bequeathed. To many of these we will let our Christmas gift this year be the story and message of her, who was our Christmas gift to heaven in 1917.

Faithfully, in the Immaculate Heart of Mary,

*Brother Francis, M.I.C.M.*

## First Canonized Saint of the United States

# MOTHER FRANCES XAVIER CABRINI



God sees all things and all acts an eternity before they are or happen.

Most are aware of this paralyzing truth, of course. But, because our finite minds cannot really grasp it, we tend to give little if any thought to its awesome mystery.

And so, no one in that northern Italian village of Sant' Angelo knew the reason for the unusual occurrence there on July 15 of 1850. A great flock of white doves swirled aloft over the town that day, and then descended like a placid cloud into the yard of Signor Agostino Cabrini.

Oh, the villagers knew it was a strange phenomenon, of course, since doves were never before seen in Sant' Angelo. And certainly Signor Cabrini found it still more puzzling that he could not drive the snowy visitors from

his yard. But then he had more serious matters to concern him, what with his wife about to give birth to their thirteenth child.

No, only Almighty God, having joyfully anticipated this hour from the unplumbable depths of eternity, knew the preciousness of the occasion. A saint was about to be born. A saint who would be as delicate, as chaste, and as endearing as the little doves who not only heralded her arrival, but who also in later years would appear wherever in the world she would travel. They would, these gentle feathered companions, perch on her shoulders, her head, her lap. They would "flutter about her in tamest friendliness" and carpet the earth before her feet as she talked to them.

But how could Signor Cabrini have known this was the explana-

tion for the presence of an angelic-like host outside his window? He could not. At that moment he was thinking only of his wife, Stella, now in labor, to whom he brought one of the cooing creatures for comfort.

The future apostle, Francesca Maria Cabrini, was eager for action right from the start. For she was born only moments later in that month of the Precious Blood, a full two months ahead of time. No wonder Agostino was concerned, having already lost several of his children! The premature infant was so frail, in fact, that he carried her the same day to the parish church to be baptized, fearing she would not even live through a night.

Poor little apostle! It would be many years before others would come fully to realize that even her lifelong fragile health was supremely outmatched by a dauntless determination to live in heroic service to her Divine Master. Meanwhile, she would have to wait patiently, trusting that Jesus would provide that opportunity in His own good time.

#### Formative years

It was obvious that the Holy Ghost poured abundant graces into the heart of this little santina

from her very infancy. But naturally others, too, provided pious influences which molded in Francesca her character of the rarest sanctity.

Foremost among these, of course, were her parents, simple farmers, yet exceptionally virtuous and devout. Dutiful Catholic parents they were who nourished, clothed, and protected the souls just as attentively as the bodies of their children. With what patience, what love did Signora Stella Cabrini instill devotion in her youngest child, and answer endless questions about God, the Holy Family, the saints, with meticulous care and clarity! And it was Agostino, himself a model father, who first ignited in little "Cecchina"—she was nicknamed such for her tininess—her unquenchable apostolic spirit by regularly reading to her from the book, *Annals of the Propagation of the Faith*.

"Rosa," the tot announced to her older sister in all earnest, "I want to be a missionary!"

"You, a missionary?" came the response. "Why, you are so tiny! Missionaries must be strong."

Not the least discouraged by this obvious truth, Cecchina had her own childlike way of overcoming the problem. She fashioned toy boats from waxed

paper and set them afloat on the Ada River with cargoes of flowers. But, in this child's enchanting world of make-believe, these were not really flowers: "They are missionaries. They are going to China." To China, like Saint Francis Xavier, to teach the poor pagans about Jesus. She also "founded" in fantasy a convent of missionary sisters whom she recruited from the ranks of her dolls.

Cecchina occasionally stayed with her uncle, Don Luigi Oldini, a saintly, charitable old priest who was known to his parishioners as the thief who stole from himself. Don Luigi was another of the holy influences bearing on her life. On one of her visits she was again launching a missionary flotilla on the icy river when she slipped and fell into its deadly swift currents. A boy who saw the accident was helpless to do anything but rush to fetch Don Luigi. The old priest arrived to find his little niece lying on the river bank.

"Who rescued you?" he asked. Francesca could not answer, for she had seen no one. "Then it must have been your guardian angel," he affirmed with a certainty characteristic of his strong faith.

But big sister, Rosa, fifteen years her senior, was surely the

tiny saint's greatest influence, at least quantitatively if not qualitatively. Rosa, though a pious girl, was rather headstrong, and for that reason had been refused admittance into the convent. Still, we must admire her spirit of self-will, seeing her conducting a catechism class in open defiance of the Masonic anti-clerical regime which had prohibited private schools and all teaching of religion.

Little Cecchina would have been the natural center of Rosa's affection and attention anyway. For the precocious child was a bubbly and lovably happy soul, graced as well with a face of angelic innocence, waves of golden hair, and expressively large blue eyes that could melt a heart of steel. Indeed, she was the darling of all the family. But Rosa was a girl of strong maternal instincts, and tended to be pedantically domineering. Hence, she appointed herself as personal full-time guardian of the mite.

But what if Rosa was overly stern in her guidance? The child intensely loved her, blindly obeyed her, tenaciously clung to her, and imitated her every gesture. Francesca was her devoted dove, hovering beside her night and day. If Rosa would pay a visit in Church, the little one must go too. If she was pray-